

False Confessions: Some Developmental and Forensic Considerations

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There is a growing literature on false confessions showing that even well-educated adults succumb to police pressure during interrogations and make false confessions to acts they did not perform. Recently, research has compared juveniles' and young adults' likelihood of making false confessions. Because human subjects review boards would never allow researchers to replicate the pressures of the interrogation process in laboratory experiments, far less coercive methods were used in the juvenile study. Even when relatively mild coercion was applied, the overwhelming majority of juveniles and young adults signed false confessions.

The seminal research on adults' false confessions was a laboratory study conducted by Kassin and Kiechel (1996). Participants in their study were undergraduates attending an elite college in the Northeast. These students were recruited to type data into a computer and told that under no circumstances should they hit the ALT Key while typing. Hitting the ALT Key, they were informed, would cause the computer to crash and all of the data to be lost. Unbeknownst to the students in this study, however, the computer was programmed to crash and all of the data was lost. When this happened, a research assistant who had been supervising the students while they typed data claimed that he had seen them hit the ALT key. Of course, they had not. But this did not prevent many of them from confessing to having hit it and signing a statement to this effect, agreeing to return to retype data for an onerous session. What was even worse, these students subsequently "confessed" to a stranger who was waiting outside the experimental room when this individual asked them what had caused the commotion. Thus, students not only made false confessions but they appear to have internalized their responsibility for the act.

In a developmental twist to this paradigm, Redlich and Goodman (2003) recruited participants who were 12- and 13-year-olds, 15- and 16-year-olds, and young adults. As in the Kassin and Kiechel study, participants were erroneously led to believe they had hit the ALT Key when they had not and told that there was indisputable evidence they had hit the ALT Key. Participants were then asked to sign a confession to crashing the computer and told that there would be a consequence of having to spend 10 additional hours retyping the information into the computer. Compliance rates with signing the statement taking (false) responsibility for crashing the computer were: 78%, 72%, and

59% for the three age groups, respectively. Another relevant finding was that about 2/3 of the 12- and 13-year-olds and about half of the 15- and 16-year-olds simply picked up the pen and signed the statement without question or comment; only a third of the young adults did so.

Kassin and Kiechel's study was criticized on grounds of ecological validity, i.e., that the study did not really mirror the real-world of interrogations and that therefore the findings were not relevant. Redlich and Goodman's study may be criticized on the same grounds. The premise here is that while it may be easy to get juveniles to confess to crashing a computer, it is not so easy to get them to confess to murder or other criminal activity. Although there may be some validity to this criticism, in the database of 125 proven false confessions that Drizin and Leo have collected, 41 or (33%) involved confessions of juveniles, most of whom confessed to brutal murders. If the relatively mild techniques used by Kassin and Kiechel (1996) and Redlich and Goodman (2003) produce such a

high rate of false confessions among juveniles, then it is possible that the more aggressive psychological techniques commonly used in interrogations of more serious crimes are even more likely to produce false confessions.

References

- Kassin, S.M., & Kiechel, K.L. (1996). The social psychology of false confessions: Compliance, internalization, and confabulation, *Psychological Science*, 7, 125-128.
- Drizin, S. and Leo, R.A., The Problem of Police-Induced False Confessions in the Post DNA World (unpublished article)./ A list of most of these false confession cases can be found at <https://scholarship.law.unc.edu/nclr/vol82/iss3/3/>
- Redlich, A.D., & Goodman, G.S. (2003). Taking responsibility for an act not committed: The influence of age and suggestibility. *Law and Human Behavior*, 27, 141-156.